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Mental health crisis training held for Montgomery Law Officers

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MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - Two weeks ago a Montgomery County Sheriff's Deputy was stabbed while serving a probate order.

Chief Deputy Derek Cunningham told WSFA 12 News on March 24 at the scene that it's a reality his officers face every day.

"Every now and then you run into somebody that refuses to go and we have to forcibly bring them in," Cunningham said. "This is one of those times."

Those calls are increasing, and so is the danger that officers face.

Sergeant Melissa Beasley is an officer on the Florence Police force, and serving as a community mental health officer.

"Our jails are becoming mental health institutions and police have to be the gatekeeper," Beasley said.

As the state closes mental health hospitals, patients are transitioned to community-based care. Unlike hospitals, managers cannot force patients to take medication. When the situation unravels, police are the first responders and are typically ill-equipped to manage the issue.

"It is different, you cannot negotiate with someone who has a serious mental health illness and has not taken medication," Beasley said. "You have to approach it differently. They are not criminals, they need help."

Beasley's 18 years serving as a liaison between the mental health community and Florence PD led her to play an active role in a conference organized by AUM and NAMI Alabama, as she personally knows the struggle officers are facing on the streets.

"You have to have mental health officers and trained police officers who can recognize someone is decomposing rapidly," Beasley said.

As pervasive as this problem is, it's taken 15 years to bring a conference of this caliber to the Capital City, that's why police are showing up in droves.

"We can't close hospitals and put them in the community and say, the community can treat them," Beasley said. "It's going to take a lot of people and different agencies to make it happen."

Officers say this crisis intervention training is the first step to bridging that gap.

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